

House Republican committee chairman attacks climate change scientists

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The concluding months of 2015 saw a series of right-wing attacks by U.S. Representative Lamar Smith, a Republican from Texas who serves as chairman of the House Committee on Science, Space and Technology, on new scientific research that shows global warming has not “slowed” to the extent that some previous researchers have reported. Smith has accused the authors of a new publication of falsifying historical climate data in order to get “politically correct results” and assist President Obama in his climate change “power grab.”

The research in question was published in *Science* on June 26 and authored by several members of the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) and the National Centers of Environmental Information (NCEI). The content of the article consists of a reexamination of observational evidence in a report issued by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) that has been used by politicians like Smith to attack climate change science.

The IPCC report, issued in 2014, is a document that assesses “the science related to climate change” and draws on an international body of scientists to perform its reviews. One chapter of this particular report outlines what has become known as a global warming “hiatus” that stretched over a 15-year period beginning in 1998.

Interestingly, even though this has been latched onto by Smith and his ilk, the authors of the IPCC report state clearly that “hiatus periods of 10 to 15 years can arise as a manifestation of internal decadal climate variability” and that “internal variability thus diminishes the relevance of trends over periods as short as 10 to 15 years for long-term climate change.” In other words, the “hiatus” is not necessarily significant.

The NOAA-authored publication from last June

simply stated that while studying such a “hiatus” helps scientists better understand the global climate system, other important aspects of this phenomenon have not received similar attention, such as problems with historical data. They argue that the central estimate for the rate of warming between 2000 and 2015, after corrections to the data, “is at least as great as the last half of the 20th century” and that the results of their research do not support the notion of a “slowdown” in the increase of global surface temperature.

NOAA used data describing surface air temperature observations taken from thousands of weather-observing stations and vessels from around the globe. These include several new improvements to the collection of temperature data that had been made since the publication of the IPCC report, including better understanding of differences between buoy- and ship-based data, the discovery of changes in ship observations around the Second World War, and the release of a new databank that integrates global historical data with more than 40 sources, essentially doubling the number of stations available.

These new developments subtly but significantly altered the data and results to support the NOAA scientists’ argument that temperature trends during the “hiatus” were not, statistically speaking, different from those between 1951 and 2012. The NOAA group also pointed out in their publication that the IPCC had already acknowledged that the trends since 1998 were tenuous due to the short duration of the period and the presence of a strong El Nino at the commencement of the “hiatus.”

After the publication of this research in June, Representative Smith issued a subpoena to NOAA demanding that the organization comply with an investigation into their research process, claiming that

the study was “rushed to publication despite the concerns and objections of a number of NOAA scientists.” A letter from another ranking committee member who was opposed to the subpoena described Smith’s “investigation” as a “fishing expedition” ripe with “whistleblowers” within NOAA who were not even challenging the findings of the study.

In subsequent letters, Smith elaborated more on his accusations by claiming that NOAA “altered the data to get the results they needed to advance [the Obama] administration’s extreme climate change agenda.” These letters came in November and at the beginning of December in the midst of the United Nations climate change talks in Paris, which ended with an agreement that committed none of the 196 signatory nations to action. Obama’s “extreme” agenda, as we reported in December, consisted of voluntary goals for cutting emissions and self-reporting by each country, with the only “enforcement” mechanism being the pressure of global public opinion.

The NOAA responded to Smith’s investigation in a letter dated November 24 by stating that “the integrity of federal scientists’ research ... is being questioned despite a lack of public evidence of scientific misconduct.” They explain that science is a “self-correcting process” and that the NOAA article was subjected to the same norms as every other article published in *Science*. According to journal editors, the article underwent two cycles of peer review and took longer to be completed and published than the average paper.

The American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS), which publishes the journal, along with several other scientific organizations issued a public statement insisting that Smith’s attacks “threaten to inhibit the free exchange of ideas across scientific disciplines.” It added that congressional inquiry “should not be used as a tool to inhibit the ability of federal scientists to fulfill their agencies’ science missions and of agencies to attract world-class scientific talent.”

In addition to his accusations, Smith threatened the NOAA and its scientists with “civil and/or criminal enforcement mechanisms.” He also attacked the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)’s Clean Power Plan for Existing Power Plants, claiming that it will “shut down power plants across the country,

increase electricity prices and cost thousands of Americans their jobs.”

Smith’s posturing as a defender of “taxpayers” is a ruse to cover his right-wing attacks on the ability of the world’s population to have a safe and healthy environment. His claims that efforts to address climate change can only be “destructive to the American economy” are an expression of the inability of capitalist society to make any progress toward averting ecological disaster.

Prior to this incident, Smith was responsible for introducing the Stop Online Piracy Act (SOPA) to the House of Representatives in 2011, in an effort to give the government the ability to shut down the Internet or parts of the Internet at its discretion.



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